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These Days, Everybody's All-American Just May Be a Haitian

Football-Mad Florida Fills U.S. Gridirons With Kreyol-Speaking Stars

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Text

By **JOEL MILLMAN**

PORT ST. LUCIE, Fla. -- Jeff Luc, the son of Haitian immigrants and middle linebacker for the Treasure Coast Titans high-school football team here, recalls a game two years ago against Delray Beach, when he directed another Haitian teammate to stop an opponent slipping into his zone on a passing play.

"Men li la! Men li la!" he shouted in Kreyol, Haitian patois for "there he is." The two players were looking to confuse their opponent by using imported slang from Haiti. But to their amazement, the targeted receiver taunted them right back: "Mwen la! Mwen la!" "Here I am!"

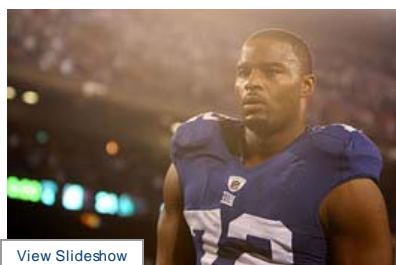
Haitians on the Gridiron

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Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

Treasure Coast High School Titans senior Jeff Luc, left, is one the nations top college prospects.

The NFL's Foreign Imports

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Nick Laham/Getty Images

Osi Umenyiora of the New York Giants leaves the field after a loss to the San Diego Chargers at Giants Stadium Nov. 8, 2009.

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Caribbean nation.

Today, the 240-pound Mr. Luc is the nation's top high-school linebacker, according to ratings compiler Rivals.com. He has drawn the interest of the nation's No. 1 ranked college team, the University of Florida, which would almost certainly provide an all-expenses scholarship to join the program. Traditional powerhouses such as the University of Southern California, Michigan, Alabama, Ohio State and dozens more are also hoping he joins their teams, his coaches say. Whichever NCAA program he chooses, the 17-year-old will join a swelling vanguard of gridiron talent from Haiti.

Three of Florida's top high-school football prospects are the sons of Haitian immigrants -- Mr. Luc, Corey Lemonier, a defensive end at Hialeah High, and Giovanni Bernard, a running back at Fort Lauderdale's St. Thomas Aquinas High School. St. Thomas is the nation's top-ranked high-school team, undefeated in its last 36 games.

Thanks to Florida's immigrant Haitian community, football is finally stirring America's Melting Pot.

Along with a handful of Latinos and West Africans, the National Football League this season boasts about two dozen players either born in Haiti or first-generation Americans raised by immigrant parents from the

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Among the cadre: Jacques Cesaire of the San Diego Chargers, Jonathan Vilma of the New Orleans Saints, Max Jean-Gilles of the Philadelphia Eagles and Ricky Jean-Francois of the San Francisco 49ers.

Haiti Lends Star Quality to High School Football

2:59

Children of Haitian immigrants have become gridiron stars at Treasure Coast High School in Port St. Lucie, Florida, displaying talent that has caught the eye of college scouts across the country, WSJ's Joel Millman reports.



Haitian-Americans were sprinkled all over the rosters of NFL teams playing on Thanksgiving Day: William Joseph of the Oakland Raiders, Steve Octavien of the Dallas Cowboys and Elvis Dumervil of the Denver Broncos. The Detroit Lions field three Haitian sensations: Gosder Cherilus, Louis Delmas and Cliff Avril.

Sports have long been ladders new

Americans climb into the mainstream and into the record books of boxing, baseball and basketball. Yet football, partly because no other country's athletes grow up playing the game, has trailed other team sports in attracting immigrants.

Nearly half of baseball's talent is foreign-born or sons of immigrants. Foreign-born players make up about 15% of pro basketball rosters. But the NFL has less than 5% of foreign-born players or first-generation immigrants.


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Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

Jeff Luc, a son of Haitian immigrants, is the nation's top high school linebacker. Three of Florida's top prospects are sons of Haitian immigrants.

The NFL draws talent almost exclusively from big universities in the U.S. heartland. And the high cost of grooming amateurs into gridiron talent makes it tough for some immigrant families to support their training -- or to buy homes in affluent suburbs where schools invest heavily in sports.

Florida is an exception. The state is football-mad, playing the game year-round. College teams here perennially field contenders for national championships and the Heisman Trophy, given to the college player voted the country's best. Even the poorest communities produce future stars.

Belle Glade, a farming town that has attracted poor Haitians for decades, is the birthplace of Dallas's Steve Octavien, and it is where Indianapolis Colts receiver Pierre Garçon caught his first pass.

"It was just the thing to do in my neighborhood, play football," says Mr. Garçon. "But I don't recall many Haitians playing in the NFL when I was coming up."

His mother, born in Haiti, worked in Belle Glade's cane fields and struggled as a widow to raise a family. Like a lot of Haitian families, Pierre Garçon's saw education as a way out of poverty, and football as a way to get an education.

In his case, it was via tiny Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio. There, Mr. Garçon played in three Stagg Bowls, the title match for small colleges winning in 2005 and 2006. He became the first Mount Union player drafted into the NFL in 60 years, when Indianapolis selected him as the 205th player picked in 2008.



This month, college coaches are prowling Florida's high-school playoffs. There's plenty of Kreyol-speaking talent to keep tabs on, and plenty of Kreyol trash talk for visiting scouts to puzzle over.

The Hawks of Seminole Ridge High in West Palm Beach occasionally warm up to chants of "*Ki sak pasé!*" That's Haitian for "What's up?" Coral Springs Colts linebackers shout "*chat, chat, chat*" ("cat") if they

see the opposing offense line up in a "wildcat" formation. Murmurs of "*frappe*" ("hit") ripple through their ranks when they dig in to stop the run. "*Neg ki devan*" is "Get that guy in front of you."

"*Vin la*" is the code at North Miami Senior High, where assistant coach Louis Presume says quite a few of his players live in Kreyol-speaking homes. " '*Vin la*' means 'it's coming,'" Mr. Presume explains. "When their defense is blitzing, we say, '*Vin la!*' It means they're bringing the whole house!"

Mr. Luc's Treasure Coast Titans made the playoffs this season, a first for the Port St. Lucie High School. Their first opponents, on Nov. 19, were the Hawks of Seminole Ridge.

The game started badly for Treasure Coast, with the Hawks scoring a quick touchdown, then

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converting a Titans fumble for field goal just moments later. Treasure Coast looked listless, trailing 10-0 late in the first half, when a short pass over the middle led to a 65-yard touchdown run, putting the Titans on the scoreboard.

See some of the Haitians currently playing in the NFL

NFL team	Player	College	Hometown	High School	
Detroit Lions	Cliff Avril	Purdue	Gren Cove Springs, Fla.	Clay	The second half was all Titans -- and all Mr. Luc.
Detroit Lions	Louis Delmas	Western Michigan	North Miami, Fla.	North Miami Beach	His brutal tackles
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	Davin Joseph	Oklahoma	Hallandale, Fla.	Hallandale	throttled Seminole
Denver Broncos	Elvis Dumervil	Louisville	Miami, Fla.	Jackson	Ridge's ground game
Indianapolis Colts	Pierre Garcon	Mount Union	West Palm Beach, Fla.	John I. Leonard	and stymied the Hawks'
Philadelphia Eagles	Max Jean-Gilles	Georgia	Miami, Fla.	North Miami Beach	pass attempts.
New Orleans Saints	Jonathan Vilma	Miami	Coral Gables, Fla.	Coral Cables	With Florida
New Orleans Saints	Pierre Thomas	Illinois	Chicago	Thornton Fractional South	Gators head coach Urban

Meyer watching from the sidelines, Mr. Luc blocked a field goal, recovered a fumble and guided his team to an easy 28-10 victory.

Titans Jephte Leveille and Richie Normil were born in Haiti. Others, like Windoff Jenice, come from those Haitian families who still arrive in Florida in barely seaworthy boats, desperate for a chance at a new life in a new land.

In his way, Mr. Luc is helping some families get that chance. He says he won't announce which college he will be attending until after the playoffs. He explains that, by remaining uncommitted, he knows scouts will keep coming -- and keep seeing other Titan players looking for scholarships.

"When the recruiters come, they don't watch me only. They watch the whole team. And whoever catches their eyes, catches their eyes," he says with a shy grin. "I just don't want to leave here and leave some of my teammates behind."

The Titans square off against Apopka High School tonight.

Write to Joel Millman at joel.millman@wsj.com

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